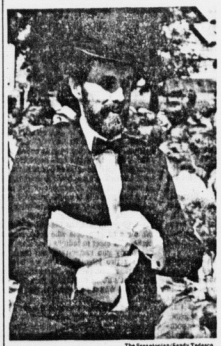
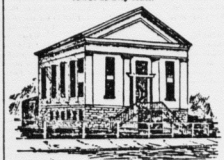
Carbondalers Unite To Restore Their City Hall



The Scrantonian/Sandy Tedesco

HISTORICAL FIGURE – S. Robert Powell, president of the Committee To Restore Carbondale City Hall, is shown on the streets of the city during the recent Pioneer Days attempting to raise interest in the project. Thus far, the Committee has provided the funds to repair the clock in the tower of City Hall.



FIRST CITY HALL – The original Carbondale City Hall was constructed out of wood in 1852. The Greek Revival building served until it burned down in 1859. To replace it, the town built the structure which currently stands as the two-story wing of the present City Hall.

Present Building Completed in 1894

By KEVIN O'HARA

In many towns and cities throughout this nation, a single public building often stands as the strongest link between that area and its past. Frequently, this dominant structure is a courthouse or city hall, built during the period of greatest vitality in that locale's history. So it is with Carbondale.

The current Carbondale City Hall, located in the center of town on Main Street, is a Romanesque Revival-style building, consisting of a tower, a three-story wing and a two-story wing. The tower and three-story wing were built at the height of Carbondale's ascendancy as a coal mining center in the 1890's. The two-story part was already in existence, having been built in 1859 to serve as the city's second city hall. The first municipal building had been a wooden structure that had been destroyed by a fire that year.

Carbondale, which was incorporated in 1851, lived with boom times during the Nineteenth Century. In 1892, the city fathers decided that the existing city hall was no longer adequate or grand enough for their town. Binghamton architect Truman Lacey submitted the design for a building that reflected the town's exalted view of itself and its aspirations. Construction began that year and was completed by 1894. Lacey's plan built the ornate tower and three-story wing out of brick and bluestone, and attached the old city hall to the new construction after adding a different roof to it. The completed edifice has remained in continuous use to this day.

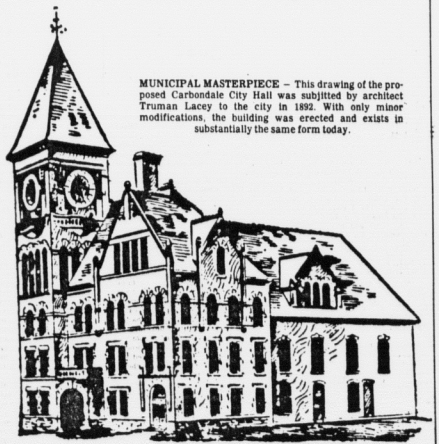
However, the building has fallen upon hard times. A lack of upkeep over the years has lead to deterioration in certain parts of the structure. This situation so alarmed some of the local citizenry that they banded together and formed the Committee To Restore Carbondale City Hall, Inc. Spearheaded by S. Robert Powell, the group decided to make its first priority something that would be highly visible to the entire community. "We set out to fix the clock in the tower, which hadn't worked for many years," says Powell.

Through a strenuous effort, the Committee came up with $3,000 which went to repair the clock, illuminate it and restore its chimes to working order. The result was widely praised by many Carbondale residents.

"When we were raising funds, many people asked, 'Why isn't the City fixing it?'. The city fathers said they simply did not have sufficient funds." The Committee has been extremely careful to avoid any political ties. Powell makes clear. "Our only priority is the building. We are trying to do for the building what should be done for the building and we leave the political questions to the voters at the polls."

Right now, the Committee is deep into an effort to raise sufficient funds to repair several badly damaged sections of the roof. In the past, the City has only repaired the areas of the roof that were over currently occupied parts of the building. Water damage has weakened a section of the roof of the two-story wing and the roof of the tower itself. It is felt that at least $15,000 will be needed to fix these two areas.

But the Committee's commitment to Carbondale's City Hall goes beyond that immediate project. In the long range, they would like to clean the exterior of the building and later repoint the stonework. "It will take us ten years if it takes an afternoon," states Powell.



MUNICIPAL MASTERPIECE – This drawing of the proposed Carbondale City Hall was subjitted by architect Truman Lacey to the city in 1892. With only minor modifications, the building was erected and exists in substantially the same form today.

Powell seems ready for the long-term commitment. Born in Carbondale in 1943, he has deep affection for the area. His parents, Helen and Walter Powell, own and operate the Homestead Golf Course just outside the city. Even though Powell works in the corporate finance section of Salomon Brothers in New York City, he returns to Carbondale several times a month to carry on the work of saving City Hall. In addition, together with his brother Donald, he publishes a magazine of local history entitled, "Northeastern Pennsylvania," four times a year.

That feeling for history led the Committee To Restore Carbondale City Hall to planning and presenting a lecture and film series on the area's past during this year's Pioneer Days. The nine programs that were presented were all very successful, many playing to standing room audiences. People who attended the programs often came back with boxes of photos, artifacts and postcards to show the lecturers. In addition, they were frequently able to tell stories of historical happenings or personal family matters which expanded or deepened the presenters' understanding of Carbondale's past. The series led to increased membership in the Committee and to many donations.

The city government itself has not been disinterested. They actively support the efforts of the Committee, recognizing the need for repair and restoration of their historic building. Recently, they provided one of the empty rooms in the City Hall as a headquarters for the Committee's activities. The group has begun to restore that room and hopes to have it finished by November in time to hold a photography exhibit there. "We are pleased to be bringing life back to the third floor, which has been abandoned for years," says Powell.

Why all these efforts? The Committee's literature spells out its reasoning quite clearly: "Carbondale City Hall is a tangible link that we, the citizens of Carbondale, have with the past. Because of Carbondale City Hall, we know that we have roots, deep roots. Because of Carbondale City Hall, our lives, therefore, have stability, our lives have depth, our lives have meaning . . . If we abandon Carbondale City Hall, we abandon a way of life that is unique and that cannot, at any price, be recreated."